

“Sport dominates our cultural landscape. It’s a gift, not a god. *Spiritual Game Plan* is a great little book for those who love sport and love Jesus, and want to relate these two loves in an ordered rather than disordered way. Recommended.”

DAN STRANGE, Director, Crosslands Forum; Author, *Plugged In* and *Making Faith Magnetic*; West Ham fan

“A must-read for any Christian athlete. Graham and Jonny do a brilliant job of encouraging us back to a foundation of knowing the treasure of Christ and who we are in him. May this bring you restored freedom to play your sport to the best of the abilities God has given you—for his glory and your delight.”

DEBBIE FLOOD, Olympic Silver Medallist, Quadruple Sculls Rowing, 2004 and 2008

“I’m rubbish at sport. But still, I love sport. Like millions of others, I struggle to put this amazing gift of God in its right box. My new favourite doubles pairing, Graham and Jonny, have done us all a great service by showing how sport can be enjoyed and cherished without being idolised. This book is a great and challenging read for every sportsperson or sport-lover. I understand myself a little better now, and I love my Saviour a whole heap more.”

ADRIAN REYNOLDS, Associate National Director, FIEC UK

“Over the last 40 years, no one I know has given more thought to the relationship between Christianity and sport than Graham Daniels. This gem of a book will help you think rightly in order to play, watch and enjoy the God-given gift of sport for his glory.”

GAVIN PEACOCK, former Chelsea and Newcastle midfielder; Author, *A Greater Glory: From Pitch to Pulpit*

“I love sport, but I love Jesus so much more. This wonderful book helps anyone like me to keep these two things in the correct order of priority and to honour Jesus through a love of sport. I’m so profoundly grateful for this gift of a book as a player, fan, parent and coach.”

GAVIN CALVER, CEO, The Evangelical Alliance;
AFC Wimbledon fan

“This book puts you in the mind and heart of the athlete. I would highly recommend this book to those looking for encouragement along their athletic journey, those looking to find the words to encourage a friend or training partner, and those wanting to connect their faith to their sport.”

CHRISTIAN TAYLOR, Olympic Gold Medallist,
Men’s Triple Jump, 2012 and 2016;
four-time Triple Jump World Champion

“I really enjoyed reading *Spiritual Game Plan* and can’t wait to get and give away loads of copies. Whether you’re regularly competing, retired to the armchair, or spending hours on the touchline cheering loved ones, you won’t fail to be challenged here to make sport count for Christ.”

DAVE GOBBETT, Lead Pastor, Highfields Church; amateur
at tennis and snooker; professional dad-taxi-driver for
cricket, football and swimming; lifelong West Ham fan

“Love sport? This wonderful book can help you enjoy it more as you frame it in God’s big plan for you and the world.”

PAUL REES, Lead Pastor, Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh

“This book covers so many poignant topics related to winning and losing and how we see ourselves when we’re immersed in the sporting world. It shows us that we are more than our achievements and that it’s possible to be successful without a medal. Chapter 4 was particularly resounding for me.”

NATHAN JONES, Charlton Athletic manager; former Southampton and Luton Town manager

“This outstanding book accomplishes what so few Christian books do: it is theologically rich, culturally insightful, accessible, well-applied and heartwarming throughout. Whether you are an elite athlete, a parent of a child passionate about sport, a coach, a club player or a fan, you will find so much to benefit you here.”

PETE NICHOLAS, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Downtown, New York

“This book reinforces my love for God and the ultimate purpose he has for me through sport. It takes the complexity of it all and formulates it in a way that is relatable to everyone, using the testimonies of successful sporting figures. No matter what stage you are at as a believer or an athlete, this book will give you a deeper understanding of how your faith and sport can be combined to serve God. I highly recommend it!”

KIRANI JAMES, Olympic Gold Medalist, Men’s 400m, 2012; Men’s 400m World Champion, 2011

“Engaging, enjoyable, perceptive and full of biblical wisdom and practical relevance. Every sport-loving Christian should read this.”

JAMES ROBSON, Principal, Oak Hill Theological College, London

“Graham is someone I trust and someone who has had a great impact on my life and the lives of many others. I’ve spoken to him on many occasions when I’ve had to make difficult decisions in my career. He always makes time for people, and I think that’s because of his faith. He’s a great friend, and I was very lucky that when I signed for Cambridge United Graham arrived the same day.”

DAVID MOYES, former Manchester United, West Ham and Everton manager

“I love this book. Graham and Jonny have filled it with Scripture and insights from Christian athletes and their stories; with sound theology and wise practice; with Christ-centred perspective and plain guidance for players, fans, coaches and parents. And all this under the banner of God’s glory through Christian joy and our joy to his glory. I only wish we had had this book sooner. In our sport-obsessed society, this will help Christians of all ages, all sorts and all sports.”

DAVID MATHIS, Senior Teacher, desiringGod.org;
Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, MN; Author,
A Little Theology of Exercise; American-football fan

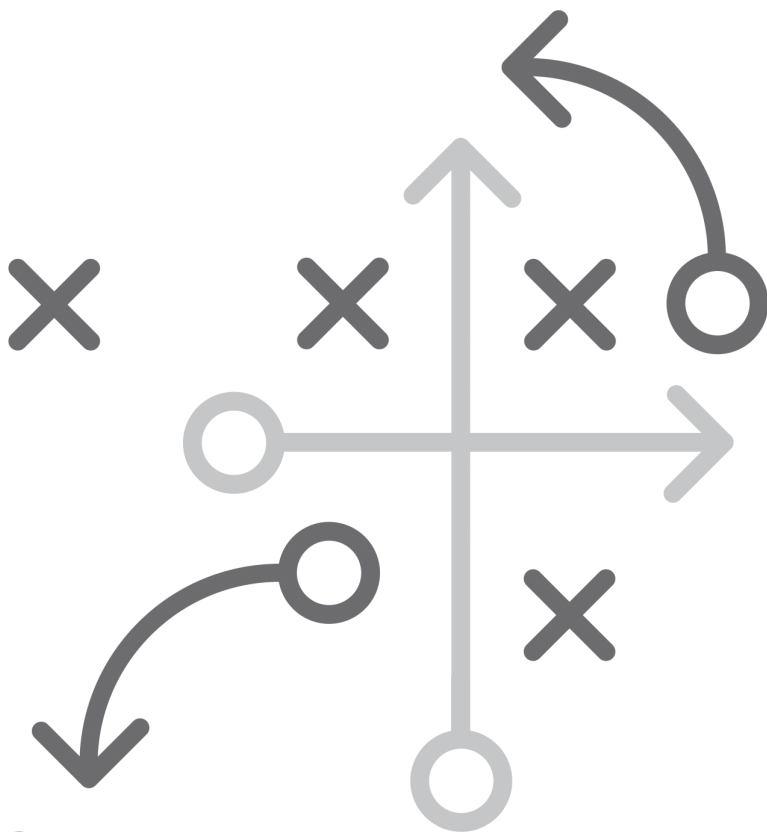
“I’m a football manager, and in this world you’re judged on your successes and failures. Reading this book helped make clear to me that what happens to me in the game and how others see me does not define who I am. What defines who I am is how the Lord sees me and his unconditional love for me. This book has helped me to be level-headed in my mindset as I go into games, because it’s God’s love that gives me hope and my future.”

DARREN MOORE, former Portsmouth and West Brom defender; Port Vale manager

Spiritual Game Plan

Graham Daniels
& Jonny Reid

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**Competing
with Joy
and Godliness**

Spiritual Game Plan: Competing with Joy and Godliness

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Introduction

I (Graham) was a professional footballer when I became a Christian in 1984. (This happened to be the year my team set the all-time record for most successive games without a win, but that's beside the point.) I went to meet my new church leaders to discuss baptism. The conversation went well—until one of them questioned whether it was appropriate for a Christian to work in the highly competitive and commercial world of professional football.

It was a good question.

Before I'd formulated a response, one of the other leaders pointed out that being a professional athlete brought many evangelistic opportunities. He accepted that elite sport had several negative aspects but said that the platform provided by being a footballer potentially countered them, because I could use my (small amount of) fame and status for public evangelism.

The suggestion that the merits of evangelism trumped the defective aspects of professional football won the day. The meeting with my church leaders ended well, and the request for baptism was granted. Soon

enough I did have opportunities to speak about Jesus at several events, both as the “celebrity” testimony and alongside far more successful sportspeople. It appeared that you could be a Christian in sport as long as you realised that the point of sport was as a useful platform to evangelise people.

I (Jonny) was not yet born in 1984, and I have never come near to professional level in any sport! But I did grow up sport-obsessed. As soon as I could walk, I had a stick and a ball in my hand. From hockey to cricket to golf, anything that involved a bat and a ball would occupy me for hours (and in the case of cricket, days!). I played competitive sport throughout school. I put my trust in Jesus in my teenage years, and from then on, the two dominant aspects of my life were my faith and my sport. But the two never mixed. It wasn't until I was 17, having played competitive sport for nearly ten years, that I was first challenged by the idea that maybe God had something to say about how I approached and thought about my sport.

We are guessing you picked up this book because you love sport (or someone in your family does) and because you also love Jesus. So which of the three approaches we've outlined here do you find yourself most naturally aligning with?

1. Deep down you think sport is probably a waste of time and that proper Christians should spend time doing proper Christian things. Sport is not one of those things, and so you feel a bit guilty about loving it.

2. Sport is a useful vehicle for evangelism. It gives a platform for the gospel, and so it's okay to play if you use it to share the gospel.
3. Sport is great, obviously! And you've never really thought about if and how it connects with your faith.

In our experience most Christians take one of these three approaches unless they steer clear of sport altogether (which neither of us can quite imagine doing, but God did make everyone different!). In this book we want to offer you a fourth way of thinking about sport. It's one which starts with God and asks why God would ordain the creation of this thing called sport. It's a way which shows how sport is a wonderful gift that God can use to play a key role in our growth and maturity as Christians. As we look at the Bible, we'll see a more liberating approach than feeling a bit guilty, a deeper approach than only seeing sport as an evangelistic opportunity, and a better approach than not linking our faith and our sport at all.

To do that we're going to spend six chapters looking at what God's word says about sport and how the gospel transforms our thinking about and participation within it. Having established these core principles, the last four chapters of the book will apply them to various different ways of being involved in sport besides simply playing it. So please read all of the first six chapters, and then pick and choose the ones at the end that apply to your particular circumstances.

It's fair to say we both *love* sport. Our prayer is that this book will enhance your love for sport too—but also, and more importantly, exponentially increase your love for God.

And in case you're wondering, I (Graham) am no longer the not so proud owner of the record for the longest streak without winning. I'm grateful to the efforts of Derby County in 2007-2008 for removing that particular accolade from me...

Chapter 1

Why God Made Sport

Sport, at its best, is a source of great joy—and there’s a reason for that. In the film *Chariots of Fire*, the 1924 Olympian Eric Liddell says:

*“I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.”**

These words reveal why God made a world that includes sport, why so many of us are wired to love it, and why the Bible has much to say about it.

The world of the Bible was an ancient one, but it was also a sporting one. The apostle Paul, for instance, was clearly familiar with sport and regularly chose to use athletic metaphors for living the Christian life: a race (1 Corinthians 9:24), a fight (1 Timothy 6:12), training (2 Timothy 3:16) and so on.

* While he says this in the film, it’s not clear if Liddell actually said this in real life. But it captures well his approach to his running.

But to understand what the Bible says about sport, we need to go a bit deeper (and a lot earlier) than the New Testament's use of sporting language. We need to go back to the beginning, to creation. It will seem as if we've stepped away from sport (having only just begun), but as we explore four aspects of God's design and desire for humanity, we'll see how they connect to our sporting life—and how each both explains our love for and increases our joy in sport.

Creativity: God is creative, and sport reflects this

The very first line of the Bible tells us:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

Now, just in case you have swept over this familiar sentence without finding it awesome, we are going to stop and see if we can make your jaw drop. Let's consider a slightly later part in the creation story:

God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. (Genesis 1:16-17)

Check out those final five words: “He also made the stars”. It reads like a throwaway line. Yet scientists estimate there are 200 billion galaxies in the observable universe. To the Creator God, such an awesome act is so easy that it is almost captured as a footnote.

Now look outside the window (or go and find one if you're reading in a windowless room) and look at the

different things you can see. If you can see a tree, then it is one of over 73,000 different species, and trees are one group within the 380,000 or so species of plant that God chose to create. Each was intricately designed by the same God who made the stars. God is innately and wonderfully creative, and designed a vast, ordered and perfect world.

However, in a sense, God left some work to be done on his behalf. As the Bible teacher and author Nancy Guthrie says, “Eden was unspoiled but also unfinished”.¹ This is where the story of human creativity begins:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (Genesis 1:26-27)

Humans are God’s “image”. To understand what this means, it is helpful to know that the book of Genesis, like the rest of the Old Testament, was mostly written in Hebrew. The Hebrew word translated as “image” can also be translated as “idol” or “statue”—the word means a visible representation of an invisible being. Therefore, while many religions place statues of gods in temples so that worshippers can “see” their god, Genesis makes it plain that humans don’t need to build stone images because we are made as God’s living images. “As a mirror reflects, so man should reflect God ... in man God is to become visible on earth.”²

One implication of being God’s image on earth is

captured in God’s job description for humanity in Genesis 2:15:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Once again, to grasp the wonder of what God is doing, we need to unpack the sentence. The original Hebrew word translated here as “work” can also be translated as “service”, and it is also often rendered as “worship” in the Old Testament (for instance Exodus 3:12; 8:1; 2 Samuel 15:8; Psalm 102:22).

The relationship between these three words is very important. Work, service and worship are not separate things. We are used to separating at least two of these ideas—“work” and “worship”. We typically view “work” as doing your job to earn a living and “worship” as what happens in church buildings.

Genesis does not do this. All kinds of creative enterprises—what we would tend to call activities of “work” or even “leisure”—contribute to the worship of God in the fulfilment of his plan to develop his world. Tim Keller defines “work” as...

“... rearranging the raw material of God’s creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.”³

The “creation mandate”—to rule the world under God by working and taking care of it—implies that every creative activity is an opportunity to work in the service of God and is (or should be), therefore, an act of worship. The worship of God is to be

found in every aspect of human creativity, including entrepreneurship, engineering, business, the arts, music... and sport.

Sport is full of creation. We're creative in sport when we invent a new shot (like the reverse scoop in cricket), when we work out the best way to get the better of our opponent during a game, or even when we create that new catchy song to sing on the terraces. God created people with athletic ability to use their sporting talents to work, serve and worship him.

And there's more. God's plan, captured in that job description, was for humanity to riff on God's initial design and extend it. The first man and woman were to extend the Eden that God had made. Whenever we create within God's creation, we are reflecting this God-given role. Sports are an outworking of this; over the centuries, humans have developed numerous sports by taking games and formalising the rules and rankings. Today, there are millions of people playing hundreds of sports across the globe. To take one example, a Christian, James Naismith, while he was studying at the YMCA's International Training School, wanted to create a game that would connect sport and faith by promoting character traits like teamwork and creativity while minimising the use of physical violence that was found in other sports. The result was basketball.

The invention of any sport, with the imagination required to take an initial kernel of an idea and bring it to an ordered and bounded form for mass participation, is itself reflecting the kind of world that God created.

Sport brings out our God-given creativity. Designing or playing is an opportunity to develop God's good creation and fulfil our job description to work, serve and worship God in the world he has made.

Community: God has always been in community, and sport is about relationships

In the creation story, God says:

Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.

(Genesis 1:26)

God speaks about himself as “us”—as plural rather than singular. As the Bible unfolds, it becomes clear that this is because God has never been on his own, but has always been three-in-one. “You loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24) is how Jesus, God the Son, describes his eternal relationship with God the Father. This is why we can say that “God is love” and that God was love before there was any human to love. This love from eternity flows down to, and should flow out from, us:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

God's design for humanity is to build loving community that reflects his own nature. That's why God says:

It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. (Genesis 2:18)

From the beginning, the mandate to develop God's world was to be a team effort. The most basic teamwork for looking after creation is the making of new humans through the relationship between a man and women.

It is deeply human to have relationships—to give and receive love. We need friends, and we need family. We all know this. Of course, being alone is fine, and it sometimes keeps us sane! But to be lonely is terribly distressing, and to feel always alone is even worse.

At its best, sport is deeply communal. Think about the bonds sport creates—the exhilaration of a great moment in a team sport when you get to be one individual contributing to a shared victory, or in an individual sport when you win a race and your coach is there to see it, or a time when you look into the crowd or around at the finish line and see someone who loves you, cheering you in.

Sport, even when it is most individualistic, is always a team affair.

Michael Jordan, while involved in a team sport, transcended his team and his sport. Yet, despite his own unrivalled talent, he recognised that he couldn't play without his team, especially his great friend Scottie Pippen:

“I didn't win without Scottie Pippen, and that's why I consider him my best teammate of all time. He helped me so much in the way I approached the game, in the way I played the game. Whenever they speak Michael Jordan, they should speak Scottie Pippen.”⁴

